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Activism across the lifecourse: circumstantial, dormant and embedded activisms

Abstract

Focussing on the relationship between activism, the individual and the lifecourse, this paper argues for the importance of conceptualising activism as a dynamic temporal, as well as spatial process. Transferring Nancy Worth's understanding of youth transitions 'as becoming' onto activism, three states of activism are considered: circumstantial, dormant and embedded. Empirical research drawn from interviews with adults aged 18-30 who were involved in organisations that engage in activist work during their teenage years in the North East of England are used to illustrate the temporal dynamics of each of these states.

Unsettling the recent (over)emphasis in the studies of youth and P/politics of the 'here and now', activism which is *circumstantial*, important for young people in the moment, is shown to play a significant role for young people in making possible multiple potential futures. Young people are portrayed as the un/conscious curators of these futures. As these young people become adults, for some their formal involvement with activism 'ends'. Acknowledging the emotional toil of this, this 'ending' is reconsidered in light of complex youth transitions. Activism is reconceptualised as *dormant* – awaiting a different position in the lifecourse or a new moment of conscientisation. Finally, contributing to a growing body of literature within Geography which considers how activism is more than participation in grandiose, iconic events but can be identified in smaller, more intimate embedded encounters, this paper considers how activism becomes *embedded* and, at times, is enacted gently. Going beyond the documentation of small scale activisms, the spaces and scales of activism at this point in the lifecourse are examined.

This paper ends by considering the challenges for scholarship of theorising activism as a temporal process. It also highlights several productive avenues for future research which have been opened up through the naming of these three states of activism.

Key words

Activism, Time, Youth transitions, Narratives, Lifecourse, Intimate

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Activism across the lifecourse: circumstantial, dormant and embedded activisms

Introduction

Kerry¹ (aged 14) campaigned to reduce the speed limit outside schools across County Durham to 20 miles per hour. Tim (15) spoke at conferences across the country about children's rights. Sarah (17) led research into making public transport more accessible for disabled young people. Josie (18) explained to 2000 protesters how the 'cuts' in the North East of England were effecting youth services.

Each of these young people could be described as 'activists', undertaking actions which seek to challenge and change their social and political worlds. This paper questions if and how young people's experiences of activism continue to affect them as they 'become' adults, as they negotiate the socially constructed 'spatio-temporal rhythms through which lives go on' (Horton and Kraftl 2006,273). In doing so I argue for the importance of conceptualising activism as a dynamic *temporal* as well as spatial process, arguing that as activism is encountered and enacted in different spatiotemporal moments in the lifecourse, past narratives of activism continue to affect both these present spaces and potential imagined and possible futures.

Geographers have long examined activism as a spatial process (e.g. Brown and Pickerill 2009b; Martin 2003) with more recent attention being given to the intersections of space and time (e.g. Panelli 2007). This paper focuses on the relationship between activism, the individual and the lifecourse (as opposed to tracing shifts in metanarratives of activism through time (e.g. Sarre and Jehlička 2007). Drawing on Nancy Worth's (2009) understandings of time in relation to youth transitions and reapplying it to activism, this paper offers three types or 'states' of activisms: circumstantial, dormant and embedded, demonstrating how the study of each of these as fluid states enriches current geographical scholarship of activism. In doing so, this paper also contributes to a growing body of geographical literature which considers how activism is more than engagement in the 'grandiose, the iconic, and the unquestionably meaning-ful' events but can be identified in smaller, more intimate encounters (Horton and Kraftl 2009,14; Pain 2014; Askins 2014). Developing these observations, this paper uses empirical examples to reflect on movements between these scales of activism – arguing for closer attention to be paid to fluxes in activism across the lifecourse.

The questions examined here are relevant to experiences of activism across the lifecourse, however the empirical focus on young people as they become adults deliberately seeks to challenge the uncomfortable position temporality holds within some arenas of scholarship –

particularly as Worth (2009) argues within some aspects of children's geographies but also more broadly amongst work labelled within the 'new social studies of childhood'. Under this label, discourses that frame children and young people as social and political 'becomings', as citizens only 'in-the-making', as 'our *future*', have been challenged: children and young people have been repositioned as competent social actors, political 'beings' in their own right whose lives and political actions are of worth studying in and for the 'here and now' (e.g. Weller 2007; Skelton 2010). This repositioning was undoubtedly needed and has provoked important contributions to the way children and young people are understood both in theory and practice. It has, however, made some wary of (re)considering children and young people's relationship with temporality and their positionality within the lifecourse, for fears of weakening the arguments that children and young people can and should be considered active political agents in the 'here and now'. This paper challenges this reluctance whilst also responding to both Hopkins and Pain's (2007:290) call for more work 'excavating pathways and experiences over the lifecourse' and Bosco's (2010,385) challenge to broaden the connection between political and children's geographies through exploring how:

Children's actual involvement in different types of activities do political work and have political implications for both the immediacy of children's lives and beyond.

Narrating activism: methodology

The arguments within this paper are grounded in empirical research conducted with adults aged 18-30 who had been involved, during their teenage years, in organisationally mediated activism. To facilitate discussions of temporality, participants were interviewed between 6 months and 12 years after they had left the organisations (average: 5.5 years). Interviews were conducted either in person, over the telephone, Skype or 'Facebook chat'. These interviews formed one part of a wider research project which involved over 60 people aged 8-34.²

Examples in this paper are drawn from interviews with 15 participants who either previously attended human rights organisation 'Investing in Children', or community-led charity 'Scotswood Centre', both located in the North East of England. In fitting with the recognition that community development has become a 'key site' for activism, both these organisations can be said to be doing activist work as they seek to challenge and change the way young people are viewed both in their communities and in UK society (Panelli and Lerner 2010,1344; Kothari 2005). Investing in Children believe that young people as a collective within UK society are facing an injustice – their human rights are not adequately being recognised or respected. Young people at Investing in Children speak at conferences about human rights, devise and conduct local and national research projects and/or produce educational materials that seek to challenge this injustice. At the heart of Scotswood's community work is a desire to combat local economic and social inequality. As part of its work, young people are supported and encouraged to take part in local events, such as protest rallies against austerity measures, to provide a voice for young people in the community.

The remainder of this paper is divided into three sections. The first, disrupts the notions of the 'here and now', arguing that whilst young people's experiences of activism may be *circumstantial*, they should not be studied as discreet moments, separated from other experiences across the lifecourse. The second explores what happens when experiences of activism are extended into new spatiotemporal moments of people's lives. It is argued that rather than experiences of activism ending, they are *dormant*, awaiting altered circumstances or new moments of conscientisation. Finally it is considered how narratives of activism can become *embedded* in people's lives, paying specific attention to questions of space and scale. I conclude by reflecting on the implications for scholarship on viewing activism as a dynamic temporal process.

Circumstantial activism: more than the here and now?

Geography has been at the forefront of scholarship that demonstrates how activism (and more broadly acting P/politically) is not just the preserve of adults but involves children and young people as active agents (e.g. Skelton 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2013). This work often concentrates on the spaces which enable (or constrain) children and young people's activism and centres on the mantra that children and young people are and should be considered active political agents in the 'here and now'. Yet despite its importance, acknowledged in this paper's introduction, this notion masks the temporal dynamics of young people's experiences of activism.

Writing about youth transitions, Worth (2009,1050) draws on Elizabeth Grosz's understanding of time to theorise transitions 'as becoming', seeing them as always 'open, multiple and in flux'. Her conceptualisation evolves from two strands of thinking: that identities are not fixed but are becoming (similar to Gallacher and Gallagher's 2008 concept of 'emergent becomings'), and that time is not linear but any given moment consists of past experiences and the potential of multiple futures (see also May and Thrift 2003). Worth's, dual understanding of identity/time as becoming has applicability beyond the study of youth transitions. It can be usefully applied to understandings of activism to contest unhelpful misrepresentations that young people's political encounters are solely either 'about' their position as political beings in the here and now, or their training as future political citizens.

The recollections of participants' experiences of activism as young people gathered for this research align firmly with accounts of young people being political beings in the here and now (e.g. Skelton and Valentine 2003). None of the participants described becoming involved in these organisations as a way to deliberately enhance their 'CV' or job prospects. They were not engaging in conscious 'practices of distinction' (Holdsworth 2015, 1) but in *circumstantial activism*: activism emerging from specific spatiotemporal circumstances. Involvement was fuelled by a mixture of passion (Kerry, now 28, explained she got involved at age 15 'because I loved it, I had no idea that young people were entitled to have their own rights, as soon as I got the opportunity to think about it I was like "yeah this was right, let's champion it"') and convenience. Participants reported becoming involved to improve their lives and those of other young people, but also because it facilitated friendships, alleviated boredom and

provided extra pocket money (at Investing in Children young people got paid for their time). Although motivated and sustained by present concerns, these political experiences were not understood by participants as discreet moments in time but were permeated by their, at times conscious, potential impact on their futures. Youth, and applying Worth's theorisation of time I would contend all stages in the lifecourse, cannot be separated from the presence of potential futures (Qvortrup 2004), making it important that this aspect is embraced and embedded, not feared or overlooked, in scholarship on young people and P/Politics.

Conceptualising activism as becoming – as always necessarily permeated by the presence of the past and potential futures, and bound up in questions of identity, is perhaps clearest in retrospect. Participants found it easier from the distance of, for some, several years, to articulate how these narratives had become fluid, temporal processes. They shared how as they underwent what is now commonplace to call a complex (and competitive) period of transitions towards 'adulthood' (see Furlong et al. 2011), they proactively curated their narratives of these circumstantial activisms into something marketable:

What's important now is my CV... my work with Investing in Children helped me get in [to the Police] because on the interview days they ask you: 'name a time when you have had to deal with conflict? Or someone being aggressive? I used an example from work that I have done with Investing in Children. (Mike, age 20, 3 years since involvement)

It had such an impact on my future which at the time I couldn't of predicted ... Investing in Children featured heavily in my personal statement. (Jaquinda, age 20, 2 years since involvement)

Participants were *now* deliberately partaking in practices of distinction. Their past actions making their futures (in the Police force, at university) possible. But the past is not comprised of static memories, it is 'always moving on— being constantly re-experienced and reconsidered—as we experience the newness of the present' (Worth 2009, 1055). Constructing time as non-linear facilitates the conceptualisation that this connection with their futures was, although often unarticulated, present and a part of their activism as young people. This reflective, more longitudinal perspective facilitates a fuller understanding of the motivations (both un/articulated) of activism for young people and how these are repositioned and curated at different moments in the lifecourse.

Adding two extra layers of complexity to studies of activism, this section has firstly identified that it is at times motivated by convenience and circumstances; akin to critiques of participation (Cooke and Kothari 2001), activism should not be overly glorified or uncritically accepted as stemming from 'pure' motivations. Secondly it has argued that activism needs to be understood as temporal: it is more than the 'here and now', it is also making possible potential futures. The following sections trace what happens when circumstances change and narratives of activism 'end' or evolve in the newness of the present spatiotemporal circumstances of people's lives.

Activism ending? Dormant activisms

At the time of interview the participants were no longer young people: aged 18-30 they were considered adults within UK society, a category (although experienced diversely) that is commonly accepted as structurally very different from that of youth in the UK. Illustrating this, participants recalled how as they left compulsory education (at either 16 or 18), they entered into various states of (un)employment, further education and/or parenthood. The complexities of these transitions, which brought new found responsibilities (e.g. 'early' parenthood) and financial pressures (e.g. being unable to afford an adult bus fare to attend meetings/protests), were cited by many as reasons for ending their formal involvement in these activist organisations.

Some participants articulated a sense of loss at this ending. It is well established that experiences of activism are bound up with complex emotions (see Brown and Pickerill 2009a), for some participants narrating these past experiences was emotional. Lee, now 20 had been involved with Investing in Children from ages 14-17. A father of two and in an instable financial position Lee felt his involvement had become unsustainable. He mourned the 'sense of achievement' he felt whilst there, juxtaposing it against the uncomfortable uncertainty of his current circumstances 'in and out of temporary work'. Lee's recollections indicate the need for closer attention to be paid to the emotional toil of organisationally mediated activism 'ending', particularly when it is so closely entwined with (and even brought on by) socially constructed moments in the lifecourse. However, applying a temporal lens to activism, perhaps it is unhelpful to think of narratives of activism such as these as having 'ended'. Whilst Lee does not mention any future intensions to reengage with activism, as was evident in the previous section, elements of these past experiences can be (re)curated at any moment. Sharon, whose life currently centres on caring for her young daughter and Nan, shared how she hoped one day to start her own activist youth organisation. Her narrative had been interrupted (but not ended) by the responsibilities of adulthood. It is more useful, therefore, to consider activisms such as Lee's and Sharon's which are no longer so obvious, as *dormant*. Their narratives are waiting for a change in social/financial circumstances and/or, as will be explored in the following section, for a renewed moment of conscientisation to spur them into action and cause them to rejuvenate and curate their past experiences in the newness of their present spaces. Thinking about the temporalities of activism in this way and its connections to the lifecourse highlights the need for further explorations into the structural reasons which may contribute to periods of dormancy – the study of which would be 'lost' without this more longitudinal, temporal view of activism.

Embedded, everyday activisms: new spaces, questions of scale

The call for narratives of activism to be studied longitudinally across the lifecourse is not unique to this paper. Works such as Molly Andrew's (1991) *Lifetimes of commitment* trace the ebb and flow of 'lifelong' activists. Many such accounts (e.g. Jolly 2011) pay particular attention to the life stories of extraordinary activists. Unsettling this (over)emphasis, this section traces the ways in which activism becomes *embedded* in the lives of 'everyday'

activists. Building on recounts of 'implicit activism' such as the parents/carers concerned about their Sure Start Centre in Horton and Kraftl (2009,14) and the 'small scale, largely invisible' activism of women experiencing domestic violence in Pain (2014,127), this section highlights how activism can be embedded in everyday encounters, whilst repositioning these contributions into a discussion of how spaces and scales of activism are affected by and through time and their relation to the lifecourse.

Several participants repositioned ideas they had encountered and campaigned for as young people into the new spaces of their lives as adults. Josie, who had previously spoke at rallies against austerity measures, is now using her university dissertation as a space to provoke and explore the impact of the measures. Similarly, Keturah envisages using her dissertation as a space of activism as she draws on personal experiences to create a space to listen to young people's narratives after violence. Exploring new spaces beyond those of the protest rally, they are engaging in 'writing-as-activism' (e.g. Mama 2000).

Jenn and Tim both now aged 30, 12 years on from their involvement with Investing in Children, transferred their experiences campaigning for children's rights into their spaces of work, family and friendships. Tim, now a journalist, *gently* approached his editor about a 'role for children and young people in influencing what the press prints' whilst Jenn, who works in the film industry, explained how her past experiences consciously affected her working practices:

I'm much more conscious as an adult of giving young people that I meet the same opportunity as adults to be included in decisions that affect them...I try to be very conscious of making sure that if a young person is being asked to do something that they understand why and have the opportunity to voice any concerns they have, instead of simply me saying 'ok you do this'.

Jenn also recalled an incident when a friend was praising the devices placed outside shops that emit a high pitched sound to discourage young people from loitering. She questioned him on this way of thinking and said:

Because of my experiences with Investing in Children I have the confidence to say to people who are making those kind of comments that what they are saying is shocking and unfair and those kind of technologies are just preventing young people from taking part and being included in their wider community.

The 'homeplace' also became a 'site of resistance' (hooks 2001,382) and activism for Tim and Jenn (see Broad et al. 2008). Tim hopes to raise his son to know 'he is not just an adult in waiting, he has opinions that are valid and rights that are important.' Similarly, anticipating a childhood different to hers, Jenn imagines:

When I become like a parent I will have a different way of dealing with my own children to how I otherwise would have...when I was a young person there were lots of things that I said that adults tend to say 'don't be silly' or 'that doesn't matter'. I

found that adults had quite an easy way of dismissing my opinions... now I kind of feel that was wrong of them in some ways.

Jenn and Tim's narratives highlight how small scale, embedded activism varies in nature. As the emerging field of gentle geographies attests, at times injustices might be challenged *gently* (see Finn and Jeffries 2015; Sellick 2014). However, as shown through Jenn's rebuke of her friend, small scale activism can also be bold and confrontational. These activism were embedded in the everyday, however, they were also entwined with other scales (see Askins 2014). Intimate spaces were used to challenge broader societal discourses which perpetuate the marginalisation of young people.

These examples illustrate some of the 'new' spaces these narratives of activism have been transferred and embedded into. The activism in these spaces (university/work/home) is, at times, so deeply embedded in daily actions and attitudes that, if studied separately, they may be difficult to detect. Although such small scale acts undoubtedly 'count' as activism (see Martin et al. 2007), when contextualised alongside participants' past experiences at these organisations and their position in the lifecourse (e.g. as 30 year olds contemplating the dynamics of parenthood, or as university students) they become easier to identify and their significance becomes even more apparent. They are *more than* university dissertations/conversations with friends and colleagues/well-meant future intentions, they are accessible, continued ways of slowly challenging unjust relations and nudging 'established patterns of control and authority' (Staeheli et al. 2012,630).

For some participants, transferring their past experiences into their present lives resulted in new moments of conscientisation (Freire 1970). No longer a young person, Jenn recalled how her time at Investing in Children led her to consider which inequalities she was *currently* facing. Highlighting the fluid, temporal qualities of 'being an activist', whose 'messy, complex and multiple identities' are 'always in the process of becoming' (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010,479) she explains:

It influences your awareness of all kinds of discrimination...particularly working in the film industry which is hugely male dominated ...I'm much more conscious now as a woman, than a young person, of ways in which I experience discrimination and how I can challenge that...I'm often telling young female runners in the film industry that they have a voice to be heard.

Kerry, now working for the County Council, also reflects on her present circumstances. She recalls how 'the passion that I had with the young people, now transferred it over for having the passion for the gypsy traveller community', but it has 'evolved'. No longer a young person employed by Investing in Children with minimal responsibility over the long-term outcomes of a situation, she now has to consider her campaigning in light of health and safety requirements and funding limitations. Reflecting on when she began this job Kerry says she was 'really, really, really passionate' and all 'young person, young person, young person' but now, making connections about passion, activism and age reminiscent of a (mis)representation of young people as idealistic, passionate but less rational than adults

(Arneil 2002), she says she has 'grown up a little bit' and 'can see things from both sides'. This shift is potentially more than just a question of age and Kerry's current position in the lifecourse, it may also be connected to a loss in self-interest: when at Investing in Children, Kerry was a *young person* campaigning for the rights of *young people* but she has never been a gypsy traveller. This movement of activists from being insiders in a cause to being outsiders, campaigning for the causes of the (potentially distant) other, is worthy of greater academic attention, particularly as geographers engage further in studies of emotions and activism, and explore connections between activism and apathy.

All these accounts narrated throughout this section were situated amongst those of fragmented, socially and economically-strained transitions. This positionality offers one answer to why larger scale, grandiose accounts of activism are notably absent in these narratives: why Tim approached his editor but did not challenge his rejection, why Jenn changed her working practices (and challenged others individually) but did not boycott her place of work over their practices towards women. Their lives were stretched: concentrating on parenting young children, passing degrees, establishing themselves in careers. The activism of their youth was therefore repositioned into spaces which were (somewhat) convenient and comfortable, enacting it on scales which resulted in low personal risk.

Conclusions

Reflecting on their varying nature, this paper has added to the growing documentation of small scale, everyday activisms. Going beyond this, it has also argued for the importance of seeing activism as a temporal process. Unsettling the recent (over)emphasis in the studies of youth and P/politics of the 'here and now', activism is shown to be both important for young people in the moment whilst also (often unconsciously) playing a significant role in making their potential futures possible/imaginable. Through examining the relationship between activism undertaken as young people and then as adults who have recently undergone transitions, this paper has shown how the spaces in which activism is enacted may be connected to particular moments in the lifecourse. In doing this it demonstrated how small scale everyday actions, whose definition as activism may be unsettling for some (Horton and Kraftl 2009) - particularly those who are used to tracing the lives of extraordinary activists, may be connected to different scales of past and future activisms across the lifecourse.

Transferring Worth's understanding of youth transitions as becoming onto activism, this paper used three states of activism: circumstantial, dormant and embedded to explore these temporal dynamics. In naming these states of activism, this paper has opened up new avenues for research, provoking questions such as which conditions contribute to circumstantial activism? How do these vary across the lifecourse? How can activism be sustained when these conditions are no longer present? Why do some (but not other) activists go through periods of dormancy? What can be done to resurrect these? What emotions are associated with being an activist insider/outsider? What triggers new moments of conscientisation?

This attention to the temporal dynamics of activism poses several challenges for scholarship. If activism is ‘best’ understood across a lifecourse, it requires longitudinal research. This type of research is costly, both financially and in time. It does not fit neatly within the increasing demands of a REF-orientated culture (Rogers et al. 2014), nor a standard 3 year PhD. It also raises questions of when is the right age to begin such research, with the Connectors Study (2016) looking at the emergence of an orientation towards social action from age 6, but Rosen (2016) detecting activism in pre-schoolers. Despite these questions and challenges, in an age of increasing global uncertainty in which activist voices are one way to disrupt and transform existing relations and structures that perpetuate inequalities, it is vital that such work is commissioned that seeks to provide ‘rich seams of understanding’ (Hopkins and Pain 2007,291) about in/activism across the lifecourse.

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Notes

1. All names have been anonymised
2. Project information and dissemination documents are available at:
http://investinginchildren.weebly.com/uploads/5/2/3/4/52347457/looking_back_project_pack_iic.pdf

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